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ABSTRACT

This study examined the incentives and obstacles to instructional improvement perceived by 27 rural elementary teachers who participated in a cooperative school district/university language arts staff development project. Participants were almost all female, and averaged 42 years of age and 12 years of teaching experience. Most had lived in the rural area where they taught for most of their lives, and they had a record of commitment to professional growth. Courses in the project used several "bridging" activities to aid the transition from discussing curricular change on campus to making changes in the classroom. During coursework, participants kept running journals in which they informally recorded their observations, reactions, insights, and plans. These comments frequently noted the obstacles and incentives teachers perceived in their past, present, and planned attempts at instructional improvement. Researchers analyzed such passages, identified common themes, and designed a survey which was mailed to participants the following semester. Ten subjects also participated in followup interviews. Major obstacles to change included lack of financial resources, an already crowded curriculum, and isolation from peers with similar interest. Professional self-esteem was the most prevalent incentive to project participation, and collegiality among participants was a strong force during coursework. Back in the classroom, teachers reported that interest and enthusiasm from students and parents were major sources of maintenance support. Most administrators were supportive, but only a quarter were actively involved in the implementation process. Contains 17 references. (SV)

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TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT PROMOTES INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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Teachers' Perspectives on What Promotes Instructional Improvement in Rural Schools

Introduction

The special problems of staff development in rural schools have received short shrift in educational research, despite the fact that as of 1980 almost two thirds of all school districts, half of all public schools, and one third of practicing teachers were located in rural areas of the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1980; DeYoung, 1987). While most studies of educational change have focused on teachers in urban schools, what works in these settings may have little applicability to rural schools.

In the present study we investigate and describe the incentives and obstacles for curricular change perceived by rural elementary teachers who participated in a cooperative school district/university language arts staff development project. Major obstacles included lack of financial resources within the school district, an already crowded curriculum, and isolation from peers with similar interests. On the support side, professional self-esteem seemed to be the most prevalent incentive to participation in the project; collegiality among participants emerged as a strong force during the coursework phase. Once back in their classrooms, teachers reported that interest and enthusiasm from students and parents were major sources of maintenance support. Encouragement from administrators varied greatly

among participants; they seemed to serve as a support to successful implementation but rarely served to drive the process.

Findings from this staff development project are discussed and generalized to the development of other rural staff development programs.

Background

Lack of a Research Base on Rural Schools

The term "rural" itself is ambiguous, and is often used interchangeably with the term "small" (Veselka, 1980). The United States Department of Education classifies 75% of the nation's 15,641 school districts as rural because they enroll fewer than 2500 students. The North Central Association classifies small high schools as those with 800 or fewer students. Another way to get a picture of the rural school is to consider the surrounding community: "rural can also be defined as open countryside and non-metropolitan places having a total population of fewer than ten thousand residents (Tompkins, 1976).

Scholarship on rural education or "small schools" has received disproportionately little attention in comparison with the attention given to urban-based issues and concerns. The research that does exist is of uneven quality and is difficult to locate; it has typically been done for state department use or by scholars not identified with mainstream educational research (DeYoung, 1987). Research on rural education has suffered from a low status in higher

education: low institutional priority and lack of specific funding for rural education from state, federal or philanthropic sources have discouraged professors from developing programs and publications devoted to the subspecialty (Massey & Crosby, 1983).

The urban bias is beginning to change, however, for a variety of reasons, including the studies of "effective schooling" which call into question whether bigger and more centralized really is better (Goodlad, 1984). Population shifts away from rural areas which characterized most of the past century have slowed or even reversed in recent years, making it clear that rural schools and their particular problems will continue to require solutions (DeYoung, 1987).

Characteristics and Needs of Rural Teachers

Compared to teachers in metropolitan areas, rural teachers differ in occupational interests, perceptions of their teaching situations, and the types of occupational incentives that keep them on the job (DeYoung, 1987). Community variables and school organization patterns also differ dramatically (Fullan, 1985).

On the one hand, smallness is associated with some benefits. The National School Board Association (1987) points out several factors that its members can highlight when recruiting teachers to rural areas: a low pupil-teacher ratio, variety in teaching assignments, a great degree of autonomy, the chance to be part of a small close-knit group team of teachers, and high parental and community

involvement in the schools. These factors and others encourage the success of school improvement efforts. Rural teachers generally have a long-term commitment to their teaching positions, as well as personal ties with and credibility in the community. They may also be easier to work with once the change process has started because their workplace is smaller and more conducive to promoting necessary staff interactions (Huberman and Crandall, 1983).

Personal and professional isolation is the most frequently cited disadvantage of rural schools (Massey & Crosby, 1983). Rural teachers are more likely than their urban or suburban counterparts to be "one of a kind" in a district or school, e.g., the junior high science teacher, not one member of a department. They may well teach several subjects in addition to coaching or supervising extracurricular activities and are likely to be moved to other teaching assignments when class sizes or other conditions change. As a result, they often teach in areas outside of their greatest competence and comfort. And, when a teaching situation is uncomfortable, the rural teacher often has few alternatives. These problems are compounded by the fact that central office staff available as consultants for curriculum development or instructional supervision are nonexistent in many rural school districts, especially those which have not consolidated. Building principals are frequently consumed with the tasks of administration and have neither the time nor the expertise

to assist teachers in their professional growth. Thus, rural teachers are left much to themselves to look for solutions to problems and ways of acquiring new skills or training.

In such circumstances, teachers often attempt to overcome the isolation by forming informal networks with other teachers, both within and beyond their schools. The concept of collegiality, especially when paired with experimentation, has been shown to be an important characteristic in the implementation of professional development activities in other settings (Little, 1982). Sparks' finding (1986) that peer observation and support was more effective than coaching by a trainer in boosting the effectiveness of a normal professional development activity also lends credence to the notion that teacher-helping-teacher may be an effective staff development model.

Methods and Data Source

The Sample

Subjects were 27 elementary teachers enrolled in the language arts strand of a state funded cooperative school district/university staff development program. While the total number of course participants was 38, several were dropped from the study because their teaching assignment for the subsequent year was other than a self-contained elementary classroom. Three were dropped because they did not respond to some part of the followup.

Participants were almost all female (n=2 for men), and ranged in age from 24 to 58, with the average age being 42. Years of experience teaching ranged from 0 (for one just-hired teacher) to 26, with the average number being 12. A "typical" participant was married, the mother of two, and was likely to have delayed or interrupted her career during the preschool years of these children. She had lived in the rural area where she was currently employed for most of her life and had completed her undergraduate degree and, frequently, her master's degree at the university where she was taking the present course. Among the 12 participants who had not completed master's degrees, 9 were currently enrolled in graduate programs and were planning to apply the course toward their degree programs. Participants enrolled in one to three of the language arts courses, with two being the average number taken. They may or may not have also been enrolled in courses in the math or science strands.

A record of prior voluntary involvement in workshops, graduate courses, and attendance at professional meetings characterized many of these teachers. Their participation in the Institute was but the continuation of a pattern of professional growth.

Regardless of the level of their commitment, these teachers were functioning with some handicaps. Their rural schools tend to be small, often with a single teacher at each grade level, and traditionally have limited budgets for professional development activities. Presently, these

schools are feeling the effects of a funding crisis which has many districts making plans for teacher layoffs, program reductions, and enlarged class sizes. Fueling this crisis were a four percent reduction in last year's state budget and the decline in local property values over the past decade. Moreover, many districts have lost state funding due to declining enrollments. With over seventy-five percent of the Illinois General Assembly up for reelection during 1988, many hold little hope for increased aid for education. There is little doubt that this fiscal environment may have caused increased difficulty for these teachers who were attempting to implement curricular changes.

The Staff Development Program

The Renewal Institute for Practicing Educators. The Teacher Renewal Institute at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale is a state-funded cooperative school district/ university staff development program which provides tuition-free spring and summer workshops in the areas of science, math, and language arts for elementary teachers. Faculty are drawn from content areas in the College of Liberal Arts (e.g., English, mathematics, biology, etc.) and from the teaching methods areas in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. In the fall, university faculty go out to the classrooms of participants for follow-up observation and feedback about implementation of program content. This cooperative staff development project was the recipient of

the 1987 Christa McAuliffe Showcase for Excellence Award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in the category of strengthening relationships between universities and school districts.

The Language Arts Strand. Workshops and follow-up in the language arts strand focused on the following content: the development of literacy, computers and the language arts, and language skills across the curriculum. Appendix A includes a brief description of the content of each course. Though the focus of each course is different, central themes common to all are the integration of reading and writing skills and the development of critical thinking ability.

Appendix B is the syllabus from the Computers and the Language Arts course. It illustrates how the courses were planned to help teachers make the transition from discussing curricular change on campus and actually making the changes in their classrooms. The following "bridging" activities are described in greater detail in the syllabus: journals and reaction papers, observations in other teachers' classes, panel discussions with teachers who had had experience in implementing the curricular changes, and planning and refining of projects.

During fall semester, instructors visited each participant at her school site to discuss implementation. The following spring many of the former participants were invited to serve as resource people for new Institute students. Several participated in a panel discussion,

describing their success and frustration during the first year of implementation. Others allowed new participants to observe them in the classroom and discussed their experiences on an individual basis.

Data Source

Data about the process of change and the factors that encouraged and impeded implementation of project content was collected from a variety of sources. A qualitative research design was employed in this study to provide rich description and understanding of the themes central to teachers' perspectives on incentives and obstacles to implementation of curricular change.

Qualitative design. The naturalistic orientation of this study required that certain practices be implemented to ensure the "trustworthiness" (Guba, 1981) of the research design and, therefore, the resulting data and interpretations. The factors taken into consideration in this regard are the credibility, transferablity, dependability, and confirmability of the data.

Credibility was enhanced by the year-long nature of this study. Program participants grew to trust and accept the researchers; this allowed researchers to test their emerging perceptions with the perceptions of the program subjects. In addition, triangulation was achieved through the use of a variety of methodologies for data collection (i.e, teacher journals, teacher surveys, interviews with teachers, and observation in the schools) and the analysis

of data by several researchers. Throughout the process of the investigation, attempts were made to discuss the credibility of emerging themes with participants and other professionals.

While the generalizability of the results of this study are bound by setting and context, efforts were made to promote transferability. Subjects were thoroughly sampled and their responses cross-checked on the range of program content. Moreover, when factors such as shared peers or administration occurred, subject responses were analyzed for different perspectives.

To ensure dependability and consistency of data, a variety of data collection techniques were employed. Content analyses of each data source (journals, surveys, and interviews) were undertaken by at least two members of the three-member research team.

Though the question of researcher bias is present in all research, the investigators made an effort to make the study confirmable. All three members of the research team have conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies and have reviewed the relevant qualitative and quantitative research on professional development. Triangulation of results has also taken place through collection of at least two supporting sources for each conclusion.

Needs Assessment and Perception of Motivation. To some extent participants' perceived needs were apparent in which courses they chose to take. Additional insight comes from

data collected by the various instructors through questionnaires, journals and/or small and large group discussions at the beginning of the courses. These same sources provided information about participants' motivation for taking the course(s). Follow-up interviews were used to trace any shifts in motivation that occurred over the course of the class and implementation.

Journals. Journals were used during the Development of Literacy course because participants were teaching concurrent with the course and thus had immediate opportunity to apply course content or at least think about the logistics of implementation while still in the classroom. Their assignment was to keep a running journal throughout the course where they informally recorded their observations, reactions to readings, insights from discussions, plans for course projects, and teaching ideas. The instructors read through the journals and made comments on them but did not grade them. Participants normally wrote one to three entries each week, each entry being a paragraph or more.

These journals served as rich sources of data for the present study because, while participants were not directed in the focus of this writing, their responses frequently took the form of comments about the obstacles and incentives they perceived in their past, present, and planned attempts at curricular change. For analysis, journal entries were first analyzed for overall focus, i.e., what the participant

perceived as important enough to reflect upon. General categories were established to encompass these areas of focus. Then, passages that dealt with obstacles and incentives were analyzed and common themes were identified. Those themes which appeared in the journals of five or more participants were grouped and tallied. Two journals from each Spring 1987 participant were examined, one from mid-semester and one from near the end. Evidence of these themes was also gathered from the early journals written by the Spring 1988 participants during January and February.

Surveys and Interviews

A survey was designed on the basis of the themes of obstacles and incentives that had emerged during the coursework phase (Appendix C). In October this survey was mailed to participants from the spring and summer courses. Six of the items requested a rating on a four-point Likert scale of the participant's perception of the support that she received from various sources: administrators, other teachers, parents, working conditions, etc. Below the rating scale, participants were asked to provide some rationale for their rating and to add any additional comments they wished.

Five additional items asked respondents to rate their interest in additional follow-up activities, including more visits from Institute faculty, visits to the classrooms of other participants, a reunion of participants, and the

creation of a central file of teachers' ideas based at the Renewal Institute. Other suggestions were also solicited.

Interviews were conducted during fall follow-up with one third of the subjects (n=10). Subjects each came from a different school district, and were representative of the three language arts courses. Appendix D is the format of questioning used by the two researchers who conducted the interviews. The first question dealt with participants' motivation for getting involved in the project and whether this motivation had changed over the course of their involvement. The second dealt with whether and/or how the participant had changed her teaching practice as a result of her participation. Participants were asked to provide examples of what they were doing differently. The third question asked participants to reflect on what had been most and least helpful in their attempts to implement Institute content. In this questioning, the interviewers probed for additional information about obstacles and incentives not discussed in detail on the surveys. If there was disparity between survey responses and interview comments, interviewers probed for clarification.

Findings

Journals

Journal entries from participants were first analyzed for major areas of focus. In general, participants were most likely to focus on some aspect of implementation as they reflected in their journals. Such comments occupied

approximately 60% of the total journal space. Remarks about colleagues or their ideas took up an additional 20%, while the remaining 20% was too diverse to be categorized. Within the two broader areas of implementation and collegiality, the following areas of focus were important enough to emerge in the journals of a substantial number of participants:

(1) Projection of another's ideas. In this focus, participants speculated on how another participant's idea or practice might work in her classroom.

(2) Appreciation of colleagues or their work. In this focus, participants reflected on the commitment or energy of others in the class, the enjoyment of the developing support within the group, or the relief of knowing that one's perspectives or problems were shared by others.

(3) Dissonance with previous belief. In this focus, participants commented on the contradiction between course content and those beliefs which they had formerly been guided by.

Embedded within their discussion of implementation and collegiality, participants often made comments that provided insight about the obstacles and incentives to implementation that they anticipated or experienced. Such remarks were categorized by theme.

Among obstacles the theme of time was the strongest. Adding new content posed a problem for teachers who already perceive their instructional days as crowded. This obstacle overlapped with the theme of peer or administrative

resistance, in that participants perceived that they could not make the change without being seen as abandoning other content still valued or taught by colleagues. To some extent, testing emerged as a similar obstacle in that some teachers worried that a change from previous teaching habits might not produce as high scores on standardized tests. Money was an obstacle cited by many, particularly those who wished to purchase computer hardware and software or to supplement their reading series with a classroom library of children's literature. Only one teacher reflected at length on her principal or superintendent being an obstacle. Parents were seen as obstacles only in the instance of their reaction to their young children's writing containing uncorrected "invented" spellings.

Early in the semester, self-motivation was the most frequently mentioned incentive in journals. Participants were often self-critical as they measured themselves against practices described in the readings: "I know that I should be doing more of this, but . . .." and expressed a resolve to make an attempt to change. Later in the semester collegiality within the group of participants emerged as a major incentive, with participants frequently citing ideas, projects or "testamonials" from others that gave them the impetus to put something into practice. Late in the semester, when some new practice was established in their classrooms, feedback from students became an important

incentive, with many participants reporting how the enthusiasm of their pupils reinforced the new practice.

Surveys

Follow-up surveys elicited teachers' perceptions a few months after they had returned to their classrooms in the fall. The first six items were positive statements about their preparation and support. Participants were asked to respond with a rating on a Likert scale ranging from (1)strongly disagree to (4)strongly agree and to provide a rationale for their rating as well as any additional comments they wished to make. Appendix C includes the survey form.

The mean rating in response to the statement, "The course prepared me to try a new practice in reading, language arts, or English, was 3.6 (SD=.50), indicated that participants were between "agree" and "strongly agree" on this item. In comments below the item they were asked to list the class activities which had been most and least helpful in the campus class. Helpful activities were listed as discussion with other teachers, both those in the class and those on the visiting panel; preparation and sharing of projects which they could later use in their classrooms; and "hands-on" experience with computers. Among the least helpful activities they listed lengthy theoretical articles and the written reactions to articles required in lieu of journals for summer participants.

The mean rating in response to the statement, "Other teachers in my school gave me support . . ." was 3.1 (SD=.62), indicating that most participants "agree" with the statement, although six did not rate the item. When asked to support their rating, teachers frequently described a single colleague who helped them in their efforts. When they described more than one teacher inquiring about their approach or sharing resources with them, the example almost always fell into the category of computer applications. What respondents perceived as support ranged from colleague's willingness to share computers or access to a room to listening or making positive comments.

The mean rating of "My administration gave me support . . ." was 3.1 (SD=.70), indicating that most respondents were at the "agree" and a few at the "strongly agree" level. Six participants did not rate the item. The perception of what constituted administrative support varied among participants, ranging from "He leaves me alone" to active intervention on the part of a principal or superintendent to get a new program or resource. The examples of support given to justify responses were almost exclusively in the areas of extended computer use and improvement of gifted programs, with only a few illustrations pertaining to changes in the basic approach to teaching reading or language arts. The six teachers who did not rate the item seem to have been reluctant to do so because they saw the administration as irrelevant in the efforts: "He wouldn't

object" and "I don't feel as though I need to consult my principal when I try out a new idea" were two of the comments used to justify no rating of this item.

The mean rating of "Teachers outside of my school gave me support . . ." was 3.0 (SD=.60), indicating that most teachers "agreed" with the item, but with three teachers not rating the item. Participants' examples of support fell almost entirely into two categories: (1) the collegiality that had developed over the spring or summer among teachers in the courses, or (2) the collegiality they had experienced in their involvement at conferences of professional organizations like the Illinois Reading Council or the local chapter of the Council of Teachers of English. Some teachers, including the three non-raters, seems puzzled by the suggestion that they might have ongoing support from teachers outside of their schools and wrote something like, "not really applicable."

The mean rating of "other sources of support" item was 2.9 (SD=.61), indicating that most "agreed" with this statement. Two respondents who rated the item as "strongly agree" were members of the professional organizations mentioned above and cited them as helpful in their efforts at implementation and sharing of ideas. Several respondents mentioned two other categories of support: parents and students. They described these groups as enthusiastic and receptive, most frequently in their response to new uses of

computers and, in a couple of cases, to students' journal writing.

When respondents rated the working conditions at their schools, most "agreed" that they were conducive ($\bar{X}$=3.1; SD=.59). Their comments often reiterated sources of support that they had cited in earlier examples, but took on a global tone of change being possible in the face of obstacles. Comments prefaced by limitations were contradicted in the same sentence by solutions: "There aren't enough hours in the day, but I'm making time for . . ." "We have no money in the budget for computers, but the parent-teacher organization . . ."

In response to an item stating "I am still as interested and eager to try out new ideas as I was during the Renewal Institute class(es)," "strongly agree" predominated the responses ($\bar{X}$=3.6; SD=.58). The majority of respondents noted that their experimentation had resulted in success with students, parents, and their own professional goals: "I get more enthused all the time. What a difference when you do what you believe in." "New ideas in my classroom always keep me geared up." "I have found my classroom spirit dampened much less often. Instead I am not only more willing but more able to try uplifting, encouraging, and motivating ideas. . ." Only two negative comments in this section: a basketball coach whose extracurricular involvement limited his time for planning

and one teacher who lamented her isolation from the peer support that had buoyed her over the summer.

A final section asked respondents to rate the potential benefit of possible follow-up activities to the course(s) they had taken. Interest was rated on a Likert scale from (1)no interest to (4)strong interest. In rank order, participants perceived the following as being "moderate" to "strong" in interest to them:

Having a "reunion" of interested participants to discuss how we are all doing with trying out our new ideas (X=3.1)

Visits from Renewal staff to your schools (X=3.0)

Arranging for Renewal participants to visit one another's classrooms (X=3.1)

Contributing to and sharing new ideas through a central file of teachers' ideas based at the Renewal Institute (X=2.9)

Interviews

Interview data collected from a third of the survey sample (n=10) provided additional detail about participants' motivation and about obstacles and incentives. Interviews also allowed researchers to probe for clarification if there was ambiguity or disparity between survey responses and interview comments. Appendix D is the format used for interviews.

In responses to the question about why participants had become involved in the Renewal program and whether their

reasons had changed over the course of their involvement, respondents often gave more than one reason. Overall, three major sources of motivation were apparent. Seven of the ten responses reflected some measure of professional self-esteem as a motivator. A typical comment in this category was "Going back to school makes me a better teacher . . . adds to my life." "I wanted to do everything I could to make myself a better teacher for my students." The content of a particular course was an incentive for six of the ten: "I've wanted to get away from the basal reader approach and I thought that taking the course would help me to do it." Financial incentives (i.e., the tuition waiver, the chance to move up on the salary schedule) were cited by five of the ten as motivaters. In response to the part of the question about whether their reasons had changed, four indicated that they were now considering applying this coursework toward a degree program. One indicated that over time the financial incentive had become secondary.

When asked what Renewal content they were applying and how their participation had changed their teaching, responses were consistent with the coursework they had taken and the fact that many had taken more than one course in the language arts area. Eight of the ten indicated that they were doing more expressive writing in their classrooms (e.g., journals, student-created books or plays). Three of those doing more writing also commented that their encouragement of the use of invented spelling among

beginning writers resulted in the need to educate parents and, in one case, other teachers about the rationale for this practice. Four teachers indicated changes in their reading practice, two of whom indicated that they allowed more time for silent sustained reading. All of the ten interviewed who had taken the computer course indicated increased use of the computer as a result, most frequently in some aspect of word processing or other writing application like "Paint With Words" or "Newsroom." Two indicated that their participation had led to purchasing or borrowing a computer for their classroom and two indicated that they had rearranged their room for better access to the computer.

When asked what had been most helpful in their attempts to implement Renewal content, six of the ten cited collegial support. For half of these teachers the supportive teacher was a colleague within the building; for the others, the colleague was in another school. Also in this category of collegial helpfulness, one subject indicated that a one-time visit to the classroom of a teacher who used a whole language approach had been an ongoing inspiration to her own efforts; another noted that her participation in a local chapter of the Council of Teachers of English continued to support their efforts. Four of the subjects indicated student enthusiasm for the new practice(s) had helped their efforts to implement content, while three cited parent

reaction and two mentioned support from their administration.

In the least helpful category, lack of money predominated among those participants who were trying to implement computer applications. All of them cited this as an obstacle. A crowded curriculum with little available time for more reading or writing was most frustrating for five of the interviewees who had taken the development of literacy or language skills across the curriculum courses. Two each cited large class size and the need to educate parents about the new approach as least helpful to their efforts. One each noted that lack of administrative support and lack of time to observe other teachers were impeding their efforts.

Discussion

Many of the factors that affect implementation have the potential to be both "obstacles" and "incentives," depending on the context in which they appeared and the perspective of the respondent. For the purpose of discussion, therefore, each of five implementation factors will be discussed in terms of its power both to impede and to promote teachers' efforts toward curriculum change.

Money

The lack of money was the most frequently reported obstacle, consistent with the budget crises and cutbacks in the rural districts where participants were employed. Lack of money had its greatest impact on the purchase of hardware

and software and on acquisition of new textbooks or trade books for classroom libraries. But because these teachers were so accustomed to adverse financial conditions, they were often philosophical about the lack of funds and creative in finding ways to support their programs. For instance, at the beginning of the computer course, over half of the participants had reported "no access" or "very limited access" to computers in their schools. During fall follow-up it was apparent to interviewers that the situation had improved for almost all participants, often as a result of their efforts. One small fund still available in many districts was for the purchase of resources for gifted and talented students; several participants had persuaded their districts to use these funds for the purchase of computers. They then borrowed the resources during periods of non-use. Software acquisition took a less laudable form. Teachers sometimes "shared" copies of new programs among themselves, justifying the copyright violation by the lack of funds and their good intentions to purchase legal copy in the future. For teachers trying to implement independent reading programs, lack of a good school library was often a problem. Several of these teachers began to build their own collections from book club bonuses and money raised by parent-teacher organizations. It was also common for teachers to spend their own money purchasing teacher supplies, trade books, and software.

In a very different context, money was also a positive factor. Many participants indicated that the tuition waiver had provided an incentive for their participation in the Renewal Institute. But while this waiver made the course attractive, participants' records of prior voluntary involvement in professional improvement suggest that the tuition savings was not the primary motivator. As Mann (1984-1985) observes in his assessment of the effect of financial incentives in the Impact II program: it's not the small grants themselves that make a difference. The real incentive is the network of social and professional support that the grantees are drawn into, networks that put interested teachers in touch with others like themselves (p.44).

Administrators

Much of the literature on change in schools has supported the notion that the role of the building principal is critical in implementation, a finding that has resulted in the rapid development of inservice training for principals (Fullan, 1985). The situation that the rural teachers in this study faced was much different than that described in much of the research on change. These teachers were the initiators of the change in their classrooms. They voluntarily took the coursework they needed to feel comfortable with the content and then went back to their classrooms where they fine-tuned the project, often with no other support than a single colleague or feedback from

parents and students. The unit of change for the subjects in this study was the classroom, not the building. Though some form of the implementation might "catch on" several months later in other classrooms, this "contamination" was not planned.

In only one case was an administrator described as an obstacle and this perception was somewhat contradicted by the comments of another teacher in the same district who characterized him as "willing to help if it doesn't cost any money." The majority of teachers rated their administrators as supportive, though six left this rating blank. Both raters and non-raters seemed to have a similar notion of support, however, one that required only that an administrator not impede their efforts: "I've been around so long--he trusts me to know what I'm doing." "As long as I don't ask for money, he'll let me try anything." Of those who characterized their principals as supportive, only about a quarter described active involvement: "She came in and watched our plays at the end of the unit and talked to the students about their writing." "He went to the school board and made a case for using that money for computers." When principals were actively involved in supporting teachers' efforts, they were most likely to focus on activities like computers and gifted programs, areas where there was some external pressure (e.g., from state initiatives or parents) to implement change.

In the majority of relationships between these teachers and their principals, a mutual respect for one another's territory and expertise was apparent. Principals respected the teachers' autonomy and deferred to the teachers' expertise about curriculum. Teachers understood that their principals had many drains on their attention and energy. They welcomed moral support or praise from their administrators whenever it came, but when it did not, they went on without it.

Parents and Students

One of the positive characteristics of rural teaching is the extremely close relationship between the community and the school (Massey and Crosby, 1983). The teachers in our study were concerned at all phases of implementation about what the reaction of parents and students would be to the curricular change. With one minor exception (the reaction to invented spelling) student and parent reaction was positive, even beyond teachers' expectations, and served to validate the effort they had invested.

Parents' reaction to computers often reflected some naivete about the use of computers. They were greatly impressed with their children's ability to use even the simplest programs and overwhelmed by products produced on word processing. Their enthusiasm often resulted in comments to principals and school board members, which led in turn to administrative praise for the teacher. The feedback from these two groups may have generated some

gentle pressure for other teachers to try similar approaches. Enrollment in subsequent Renewal Institute courses by other teachers within a building has been high, though the long-term effects of "positive contamination" remain unclear.

Implementation in the areas of writing and reading change was not so evident to or easily understood by parents. Change in invented spelling was the only source of negative comments, and led some teachers to undertake "parent education programs" at back-to-school night or through newsletters. Journals frequently brought positive comments, particularly when the teachers helped students to keep the entries in an attractive, organized format that was shared with parents.

Colleagues

Though some participants worried about colleagues' cooperation during the early part of their coursework, such resistance was not reported during the implementation phase. Participants perceived the majority of other teachers in their building much as they perceived their principal, "supportive" in that they did not impede the change: "If I don't affect what's going on in her classroom, she doesn't care what I'm doing over here." When asked how the others in the building had reacted to her drastically changed approach to reading, one first grade teacher said, "They're not interested--I don't talk about it much." Since she had rated her colleagues as "supportive" on her survey, the

interviewer probed for clarification. Her explanation was that other teachers had been willing to shift recess times to allow for her sustained silent reading program and had been willing to loan her extra copies of trade books available in their classrooms. Thus, another teacher didn't have to be supportive of the change in order to be perceived as supportive of the participant.

When participants gave specific examples of collegial support, they almost always referred to a single other teacher, either within their building or outside, who helped them to maintain their enthusiasm and, in some cases, to brainstorm when things were not working well.

The in-class collegiality that emerged as such a strong theme during the coursework phase was not sustained through continued contact once teachers returned to their schools in the fall. An exception was the few teachers who continued to see each other at local meetings of the Illinois Reading Council and the Council of Teachers of English. In follow-up surveys and interviews, the desire to maintain these contacts was clear. The single most requested follow-up activity was a reunion of class participants. Once no longer a part of a supportive group, many teachers found themselves even more aware of their isolation than before.

Professional self-improvement

Professional self-improvement motives emerged as the strongest incentive to taking the Renewal Institute courses and to implementing the change. In this respect, our rural

teachers were just like those in other research on what motivates teachers to engage in staff development: they became involved in the process because they wanted to become better teachers (Guskey, 1986). In describing their own internal motivation, several of the interview sample referred to their commitment to the community in explaining why they persisted in their efforts despite obstacles. One veteran of twenty-six years said, "I can't just wait until the tax referendum passes. I was born and raised in this community and I'm going to see that these kids get the best education I can give them." In our rural sample such teachers seem capable of ensuring their own professional growth with a bare minimum of external incentives. Still, they thrived in conditions of collegiality with like-minded peers and were effusively grateful when active support came from any source.

Conclusions and Implications

Rural schools are not disappearing. If anything, the small school's strengths are more apparent than ever in light of the recent research on effective schools. We now have a decade's worth of solid research showing that smaller schools are more effective in terms of producing student achievement, building student self-confidence, and reducing violence and vandalism (Darling-Hammond in D.B. Strother, 1988, p. 450).

Instructional improvement in these smaller schools will not take place under the same conditions or with the same

support that has been documented in the many studies of change and staff development in large, consolidated districts. Rural staff development will lack some of the incentives often associated with effective change processes in these larger schools, including some external pressure to try a new approach, an organizational climate conducive to the change, and ongoing technical and resource support (Fullan, 1985). On the other hand, the close-knit quality of rural schools and the communities they serve and the autonomy of teachers within these settings provide a different set of advantages.

The present study sheds some light on how the process of instructional improvement takes place under the unique circumstances in rural schools. From our study of these volunteer participants in a cooperative school district/ university staff development project, we have drawn the several conclusions which have implications for staff development planning in rural schools.

First, it is apparent that a campus-based course can be an effective vehicle for change if it avoids the pitfalls often cited when the course-based model fails to influence practice (Henderson, 1979). In the present study, follow-up visits to the classrooms of participants and interviews several months after the coursework phase provided evidence that the intended change was indeed taking place. Why the course-based model worked probably had much to do with the fact that teachers were already convinced of the need for

the content prior to enrolling in the course and that much of the course focused on activities that promoted implementation, including panel discussions with teachers who had already implemented the change, visits to other classrooms where the practice was in place, and projects which fine-tuned the practice for the individual's classroom. These activities were easier to accomplish and share with colleagues, as well as more immediately relevant, when participants took the course concurrent with their teaching rather than over the summer, a finding which suggests that the concurrent course may be a better model than the summer delivery.

Second, it was apparent that the obstacles to change in this rural staff development project were no match for the elements of human support and resourcefulness in these settings. Huberman and Crandall's speculation (1983) that rural schools may have the edge in implementation once change is initiated was supported by our findings. A number of factors seemed to facilitate change: the respect accorded teachers by parents and principal, the sense that the teacher is part of the community, the grapevine within the school and community that "advertised" the new practices, and the sense of autonomy that teachers felt about the decisions they made about their classrooms. Another advantage, that of collegiality with other rural teachers, continued for only some of the participants beyond the coursework phase. Their follow-up interviews several

months after the course indicated that, among the teachers who had become isolated, the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues was greatly missed. Those who were able to find like-minded teachers within their schools or who maintained at least occasional contact through local professional organizations like the Council of Teachers of English or the Reading Council reported less of a sense of isolation. Such findings suggest the need for staff development planners in rural areas to look ahead to this post-coursework phase for ways to continue the networking established early on. Collaboration with professional groups like those mentioned may be one starting place.

Third, leadership was a shared responsibility in the schools of many of these participants. The relationship between these teachers and their principals, in fact, very much fit the model of teacher empowerment described by Maeroff (1988) in that these teachers assume responsibility for instructional policies without disrupting the role of the principal. Both they and their principals seemed to be comfortable with the active and autonomous role that teachers played in determining and implementing curricular change. And while the teachers engaged in this curricular experimentation did not become crusaders, their ideas often travelled beyond their rooms as principals, parents, and

students discussed their positive impressions with others. This finding lends support to Fullan's observation (1985, p.401) that we must understand the true nature of leadership before we can develop strategies for more effective instructional leadership in schools, and that these strategies may not be as mysterious and difficult to develop as they may first appear.

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Appendix A

Description of Language Arts Strand Courses

C&I 585C Language Skills Across the Curriculum (Summer)

This course explores ways to foster the development of writing and reading skills across the elementary school curriculum. The goal is to discover ways to use writing and reading as a learning tool in math, science, social studies or other subjects. We will do some background reading on language across the curriculum, examine successful practices in integrating language skills with subject area learning, and interview selected teachers who have developed strategies for integrating language learning. Students will be expected to write lesson plans and exercises for their classes in the fall and to plan for implementing the teaching methods discussed during the summer.

C&I 585R Computers and the Language Arts (Summer)

This course explores ways to use compucers in the elementary classroom, with a special emphasis on using word processing to enhance writing skills. Participants will gain familiarity with high quality software for the Apple computer. We will concentrate on strategies for schools with only a few computers and for working with students who have poor typing skills. We will read articles on using computers for language arts instruction, develop lesson plans and exercises, discuss teaching methods, and talk with experienced teachers who are currently using microcomputers in creative ways.

C&I 498F The Development of Literacy (Spring)

This course explores the development of writing and reading skills in children from pre-school to junior high. An especially important concern will be taking what we know about how children develop language skills and translating this knowledge into effective teaching practices. Topics covered will include language acquisition, the relation of oral language development to print literacy, whole language approaches, the characteristics of effective writing and reading programs, and the evaluation of language development. We will examine recent materials for teaching writing and reading, including software. Among other requirements, participating teachers will develop lesson plans, exercises, and teaching strategies based on what we learn in class. (This course is restricted to practicing teachers enrolled in the Renewal Institute.)

Spring, 1988
The Development of Literacy
A Cross-listed course of the
Renewal Institute for Practicing Educators
(C&I 498f; ENG 581)

Instructors:
Joyce Killian, C&I 323A Wham
Rick Erickson, C&I 222C Wham
Bruce Appleby, Eng. 222I Faner

Texts:

Coursepack (# 104) of readings from Kinko's Copies
Becoming a Nation of Readers from the Center for the Study of Reading, available at Student Center Bookstore and 710

Course Description:

This course explores the development of reading and writing skills in children from pre-school to junior high. We will look at a variety of articles on research and practice, with the goal of translating what is known into good teaching strategies. Topics covered will include language acquisition, the characteristics of effective reading and writing classrooms, whole language and language experience approaches, and the relationships between literature and literacy.

Class Activities:

We are all teachers in this course and we can all contribute from our individual perspectives. We'll do short writings in class and break often into small groups. We have a large collection of materials (print and software) housed in the Renewal Institute, Wham 321, which are available for check out. We also have new, high quality videotapes of classrooms in action.

Requirements:

1. Each participant will keep a running log or journal throughout the course. This will be a place to record informally one's observations, reactions to readings, insights from discussions, plans for course projects, and teaching ideas. Our intention is to demonstrate to you the usefulness of writing as a tool which helps us record, think, and discover. The instructors will read through your logs, perhaps comment on them, and give you credit for doing the entries. The entries will not be graded. We expect one to three entries each week, each entry being a paragraph or more.

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2. We will each observe at least one language arts class to see what goes on in other people's classrooms. The observations will be written up and shared with others in the class. We'll do this early in the term, and if it seems valuable, repeat the activity later. We want to encourage you to look into other classroms as a way of overcoming the isolation which characterizes the professional lives of many teachers. Perhaps because of our reading and discussion, we'll also be able to see children and teachers with new eyes.

3. Each participant, either alone or as a part of a group, will develop a course project which applies ideas from the course to particular teaching situations. We'll spend time shaping these projects through class discussion and small group interaction. Projects might involve the development of teaching units or description of changed strategies for approaching reading and writing instruction or small scale classroom based research projects. The projects can be tied to the State reform initiatives, to evaluation programs currrently underway in your district, to revised curriculum guides, or to whatever seems most worth doing to you. Toward the end of the course, we'll allow time for sharing the results of our project work with the other class members.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 (1/21): Orientation: We will take some time to get to know each other, to describe our individual teaching situations, and to begin to discuss our concerns.

Week 2 (1/28): Language Acquisition: What do we know about how language develops in children? How does oral language develop? What lessons are there in oral language development for the development of reading and writing skills? What is the relation of language development to other skills, such as drawing or getting along with family and friends? (We'll also discuss and share a strategy for observing, so that we all look for some of the same things.)

Readings for this evening:
--Miller "Acquisition of Language" p. 1
--Moskowitz "Acquisition of Language" p. 13

Journal for this week: Reflect on the early development of language in young children you have known.

Week 3 (2/4): Teaching Reading: What do we know about how children learn to read and how schools teach reading? What can we say about good practice regarding the teaching of reading?

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Readings for this evening (2/4):
--Pearson "Changing the Face of Reading Comprehension Instruction" p. 42
--Samuels "Automatic Decoding and Reading Comprehension" p. 53
--Valencia & Pearson "New Strategies for Comprehension Instruction" p. 151

Journal for this week: What is your reaction to the idea that children should write before learning to read? Have you seen evidence supporting this view? Have you seen counter-evidence?

Week 4 (2/11): Teaching Writing: What do we know about how children learn to write and how schools teach writing? What can we say about good practice?

Readings for this evening:
--Furnas "Watch Me" p. 67
--Avery "Lori 'Figures It Out': A Young Writer Learns to Read" p. 75
--Calkins "I Am One Who Writes' p. 89

Journal for this week: Tell a language story -- an event which tells us something about how children learn language.

Week 5 (2/18): Whole Language: What does it mean to keep language "whole" within the classroom? Why do current theorists insist on the value of using language in purposeful, communicative situations, even when they speak of very young children who are just learning to read and write?

Readings:
--Mills "A 'Whole-Language Approach' Writing Program' p. 103
--Lee "Language Experience" p. 108
--Newman "Insights from Recent Reading and Writing Research and Their Implications for Developing Whole Language Curriculum" p. 114
--Clarke "Don't Blame the System: Constraints on 'Whole Language' Reform' p. 144

Journal:
This week, your journal assignment is to visit at least one class hour of instruction in reading or writing, in your building or elsewhere. Keep detailed notes of what goes on and your reactions. Try to talk to some of the students to collect their impressions of the session.
Write up your observation, describing what

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you saw during your visit. Go back over the ideas we have been discussing to give you a framework for your observations. Be descriptive rather than judgmental, but don't be afraid to be evaluative.

Week 6 (2/25): Observations/Project Planning: We'll devote this session to a discussion and comparison of our observations. We'll try to generalize about what we see in classrooms and suggest reasons for the variety of approaches which is certain to emerge. During the second part of the class, we'll try to get organized to pursue our individual or group projects. We'll align people with simliar interests, suggest resources, and talk together about directions for work.

Readings:
None for this week.

Journal:
Writing up your observation will be enough for this week.

Week 7 (3/3): <u>Becoming a Nation of Readers</u>: This evening will be devoted to a discussion of this important work.

Readings:
--<u>Becoming a Nation of Peagers</u>
Journal:
Consider the implications of this report for your school district. Compare your present practices and that within your building and district with the model presented here.

Week 8 (3/10): Literature and Literacy: What is the role of literature in reading development? What is the role of narrative in reading development? Do stories teach rules of organization? Why are we seeing this growing link between the teaching of and use of literature as the base of a reading program?

Peadings:
--Heath "The Functions and Uses of Literacy" p. 186
--Larrick "Illiteracy Starts Too Soon" p. 200
--Sawyer "Literature and Literacy: A Review of Research: p. 206
--Poser "Research Currents: Relinking Literature and Literacy" p. 210

Spring Break: No class on March 17. Work on your project.

Week 9: (3/24): We'll spend this evening working on projects, including a visit to the resource room.

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Week 10: (3/31): Literature and Literacy: We'll continue our discussion of this topic from week 8.

Readings:
--Harste et al. "Examining Instructional Assumptions" p. 214
--Strickland "Literature: Key Element in the Language and Reading Program" p. 226

Journal: Make a realistic assessment of what you do in your classroom to encourage and foster the reading of literature and of "whole" texts. Are you helping ALL your students become readers of a large variety of texts, most particularly literature?

Week 11: (4/7): Panel: We're inviting several area teachers who have good reputations as teachers of reading and writing to come visit with us tonight. Some of these people will discuss how they have incorporated materials and projects from previous Renewal activities and how their work in Renewal has helped and changed their teaching. We'll also look at some of the potential problems with and for administrators, problems possibly inherent in some of the changed approaches we have been looking at.

Readings:
None

Journal:
Consider how what we have been doing in this class might alter your teaching for the rest of this year and how you might change some of your teaching next year.

Week 12: (4/14): Teaching writing (revisited): We'll look at what we're doing in teaching writing and how some of the materials for the course might lead us to change. We will also look at some of the videos available for inservice training on teaching writing.

Readings:
--Tway "The Development of Writing in a Language Arts Context" p. 94

Journal:
Consider how some of your practices in teaching writing may or may not be developing students who see writing as a natural part of their lives in and out of school.

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Week 13: (4/21): Whole Language/Content Area Integration: How can and do "whole language" approaches to teaching imply and demand changes in how we view language in areas outside of those typically designated as "language arts"?

Readings:
--Allington "The Reading Instruction Provided Readers of Differing Reading Abilities" p. 56

Journal:
No specific assignment in the journal, but get ready to share your project with the rest of the class.

Weeks 14 and 15: (4/28 and 5/5): Sharing projects: We'll use these two weeks to make brief, informal presentations of our projects to the class.

Week 16: (5/12): Course wrap-up and evaluation

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Renewal Follow-up Survey

Name: _____

1. The course(s) I took through the Renewal Institute prepared me to try to a new teaching practice in reading, language arts, or English.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Which class activities were most helpful?

Which class activities were least helpful ?

Other comments:

2. Other teachers in my school gave me support in trying out the new teaching idea(s).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

If you agree, what kind of support did they give and how was it helpful?

Other comments:

3. My administration gave me support in trying out the new teaching idea(s).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

If you agree, what kind of support did they give and how was it helpful?

Other Comments:

4. Teachers outside of my school gave me support in trying out the new teaching idea(s).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

If you agree, what kind of support did they give and how was it helpful?

Other comments:

5. Other sources of support helped me to try out the new teaching idea(s) (e.g., students, parents, professional organizations, etc.).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

If you agree, who was the source of support and how were they helpful?

Other comments:

6. The working conditions at my school were conducive to trying out the new idea(s).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Please describe any conditions which helped:

Please describe any conditions that hindered:

Other comments:

7. I am still as interested and eager to try out new ideas as I was during the Renewal Institute class(es).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	3	2	1

Describe any change in your attitude or enthusiasm:

Other comments:

8. The following were suggested by summer participants as having potential benefit during fall follow-up. Would you please rate them according to your interest and add any additional types of follow-up that you think would be valuable.

Strong Interest	Moderate Interest	Little Interest	No Interest
4	3	2	1

_____ Visits from Renewal staff to your schools

_____ Arranging for Renewal participants to visit one another's classrooms

_____ Having a "reunion" of interested participants to discuss how we are all doing with trying out our new ideas

_____ Contributing to and sharing new ideas through a central file of teachers' ideas based at the Renewal Institute

_____ Other suggestions (Please specify)

Interview questions for study of
change in rural schools
Byrd/Erickson/Killian

Subject _____ School _____

Renewal Course(s)_____ Grade/Subject _____

1. Reflect on why you got involved in the Renewal program. Have your reasons changed over the course of your involvement? (Focus: motivation, control over environment, attribution)

2. What Renewal content are you applying as a result of your participation last spring and/or summer?
(Focus: content and process of implementations)
--How has the Renewal content changed your teaching, i.e., what is different now than prior to the course?
--If you haven't changed anything, why not?

3. What has been most helpful/least helpful in your attempts to implement Renewal content? (Focus: reasons behind responses, relative importance of various obstacles and incentives)